

The Sermon On The Level - Part 1

Luke 6:17-26

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We'll first read Luke 6:17-19, which is the introduction, setting or background for Jesus' sermon, which starts in verse 20 and runs to the end of the chapter. Today we'll look at verses 17-26.

Luke records, "And He..." that is, Jesus "...came down with them." Jesus had been up in the mountain selecting His Apostles. He spent the night in prayer and now He came down the mountain to a level place. "...and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases, as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed. And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out from Him and healed them all."

This is the setting for what will come to be called Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Jesus is the Son of God who came from heaven to die for the sins of the world. He is Messiah, Lord and Savior. And He was also a preacher. It says in John 7:46, "No one ever spoke like this man!" All the prophets of the Old Testament and all the preachers of the New Testament and those down through church history never come close to being able to preach like Jesus did. So today we will start reading the Sermon on the Plain.

Verse 17 says, "And He came down with them..." that is, "His Apostles," who He had just chosen "...and stood on a level place." There are three groups mentioned here: the Apostles, "His disciples" and "a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon," which is in Lebanon. So they are on this level plateau, which is on the side of the Mount of Beatitudes. Jesus was healing, preaching and teaching. And the multitudes gathered around Him to reach out and touch Him, because virtue went out of Him and they were all healed.

Everyone knows about the famous Sermon on the Mount. Our text is Luke's equivalent, and some believe it may even be a record of the Sermon on the Mount. So we don't know if our text was given at a separate time from the Sermon on the Mount; or if it is a separate sermon altogether, because one sermon was called the Sermon on the Mount, while the other was called the Sermon on the Plain, but it's possible the plain was on the side of a mountain; or if Luke is just abbreviating the Sermon on the Mount, which is the common view. So whether you call this the Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus did preach the same message more than once, so it may be a separate sermon. But we don't know and it really doesn't matter.

Jesus had just chosen His Apostles, and now He wants them to know what it is to live in the kingdom of God now, so He wants them to be instructed before they are commissioned. The Sermon thus follows the choosing of His 12 Apostles from the disciples.

Along with the 12 Apostles, there was a company of hundreds or thousands of disciples, who believed in Jesus and followed Him, and also a mixed multitude, who probably weren't believers but just curiosity seekers who came to be healed and delivered and came to hear Him teach. Some came from as far away as the northwest, from Tyre and Sidon.

But the focus, in verse 17, is that Jesus was on a plateau or plain. So I've called this the "Sermon on the Level," and this is the first part of that sermon. We'll be introduced to the Beatitudes and the corresponding woes in this first part.

This sermon takes up the remainder of Luke 6. In Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount runs from chapters 5 through 7. So we see Luke's recording of this sermon as an abbreviation. Like the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Plain opens with the Beatitudes and ends with the parable of the two builders. These are bookends to this Sermon. They open with the Beatitudes, "blessed," and they close with the parable of the wise and foolish builders. And the Sermon on the Plain, in Luke, has four Beatitudes while the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew, has eight Beatitudes. And the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain are followed by four corresponding "woes," but these aren't found in Matthew.

Now let's read verses 20-26 in Luke, the Sermon on the Plain. "Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.'"

Now here are the woes. Verse 24, "'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets.'"

The blessings mean that God has applauded you, and the woes mean that God is judging you. So He is writing blessings to the believers and woes to the unbelievers.

Neither the Sermon on the Mount nor the Sermon on the Plain is the Gospel. You don't "keep" the sermon in order to get to heaven. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). So you don't get to go to heaven because you turn the other cheek or because you love your enemies.

Rather these things are evidence of a saved life. This is evidence of the character of those who live in the kingdom of God and on their way to heaven. Notice these are the Beatitudes and not the "Be-do's." So it's an attitude of the character of those who are living in the kingdom. It's evidence of the actual kingdom of God lived out now. It's the "Christian counterculture," as John Stott says in his book on the Sermon on the Mount.

In this sermon, we learn that God's kingdom, God's ways and God's thoughts are completely contrary to man's kingdom, man's ways and man's thoughts. You might say the Beatitudes are the believers living in the kingdom of God, and the woes are the unbelievers living in the kingdom of man apart from the things of God.

Let's look at the Beatitudes and their contrasting woes. We'll look at the Beatitude and then its corresponding woe, side by side.

Starting in verse 20, it says, "Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said..." In Matthew's account it says, "And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying..." (Matthew 5:1-2). So primarily this message is for the believer and not the unbeliever, but it does have universal application, and some of it applies to unbelievers, such as the warnings.

Now here is what Jesus said in the first Beatitude. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." So we see immediately that these Beatitudes are paradoxical, meaning they are contrary to the world's views. The world says, "Blessed are the rich"; God says, "Blessed are you poor." God says, "Blessed are you who weep"; the world says, "Blessed are you who laugh." So the world is different than the kingdom of God.

So in these Beatitudes, Jesus is speaking to His disciples. And the word "blessed" means "happy and to be envied." But this is not the kind of happiness that is an emotional state or a subjective state, but it is God making an objective statement about what He thinks about them who are blessed. It means they have the approval of God. It means God is actually applauding you. God is smiling on you and approves you. It's not the applause of the world but the applause of heaven that tells me I'm pleasing God. Then I am a blessed individual.

One author wrote a book on the Beatitudes called, *The Applause of Heaven*. I like that; to think that God smiles at me, that God applauds me, that God is happy with me. That's what makes me happy. Then I am blessed. Billy Graham wrote a book called, *The Secret of Happiness*, about the Beatitudes. It's a marvelous book.

Why did Jesus say, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"? He doesn't mean material poverty or having no money. But it's interesting that in the Jewish thought, if you were rich, they equated it with God's blessing; if you were poor, they equated it with God's curse on your life. Sadly and wrongly it's the same today. "Look how rich that guy is! God must really love him and blessed him." No; he might be a member of the Mafia. I don't think he has the approval of God.

Money does lend itself to this, however. Money is neutral; it can be used for good and for God's glory, or it can be used for sinful, wicked, selfish purposes. But it is no indication of godliness whether you are rich or poor. Yet it is interesting that the Jews came up with "Blessed are the poor," because they saw their need for God. They have more of a dependence on God.

But when we have money, there is a great danger of drifting away from dependence and reliance on God. We don't humbly look to God for help in time of need. "I have all this money; why do I need to pray, why do I need to trust God?" So poverty has a built-in blessing in that it will drive us to God.

Yet you can be poor and ungodly. And you can be rich and godly. That's not the issue in the Bible; there were many men and women who were wealthy and godly in the Bible. And there were many people who were poor and wicked and ungodly, wanting money and having a wrong attitude. So that's not the issue in this Beatitude.

In Matthew 5:3, it is made clear that "the poor" are poor "in spirit." It says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." It's talking about spiritual poverty. Being "poor in spirit" is acknowledging your spiritual poverty and spiritual bankruptcy before God. It is to see yourself as truly needing God to completely forgive your sins; that you are utterly sinful before a holy God; that you see yourself as bankrupt before God; and that there is nothing in you to commend yourself to God. So when we come to God, we must come to Him broken, and bankrupt spiritually, seeing our sinfulness and our need for Jesus as our Savior.

In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a publican or tax collector. A Pharisee was a religious man and very devout. A tax collector was secular and very worldly and rich. He had all the things of this world. They were ungodly men of the world. Jesus said they both went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men."

Can you imagine coming to church on Sunday morning, and someone sitting next to you prays, "God, I thank You that I am not like this sinner next to me" or "I'm not like these sinners around me!"

The Pharisee said, "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." He was expecting to hear God clap for him, the applause of heaven. He started boasting about all the good things he had and all the good things he had done. "I pray, I go to church. I'm wonderful!" But heaven was silent.

Then Jesus said that the tax collector "would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven...." He was so broken and humble he looked down. "...but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'" That's one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. So what a contrast! The Pharisee would hear the woes and the publican would hear the blessings.

Then Jesus said, in verse 14, "I tell you, this man [the publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." The publican was humbled, broken and spiritually bankrupt when he came before God.

Which of the two would you rather be?

I like the words of Charlotte Elliott's song, Just as I am Without One Plea.

"Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;

Sight, riches, healing of the mind,

Yea, all I need in Thee to find,

O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

What a great song! "I need You to forgive me. I come broken, wretched and poor!"

Now the contrasting woe to this blessing is in verse 24. "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." The word "woe" is a pronouncement of judgment. But think about how bizarre this is: "Blessed are you poor," and "woe to you who are rich." This woe says "received your consolation." In the Greek that means "received their full payment or reward." Their payment is comfort or consolation. Wow!

There's the contrast. You have the poor, who come naked, needy sinners before God. Then you have those who are rich, who don't see their need for God; they think they're okay on their own. So these woes are not addressed to disciples, but they most likely are addressed to the multitudes, verse 17, who needed to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Wealth predisposes men to think they have no need of anything.

So there is value in poverty, but we need to be poor "in spirit." In Revelation 3:17, God says, speaking of the church in Laodicea, "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—[you] do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." One of the greatest gifts that God could ever give you is for you to see yourself as a sinner before a holy, righteous God.

The second Beatitude, in verse 21, is "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled." In Matthew 5:6, there is an addition to this Beatitude. It says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." So Jesus isn't talking about material poverty or physical hunger; he's talking about spiritual poverty and spiritual hunger. He is talking about an intense, deep, all-consuming desire to be right before God, to be forgiven and to be accepted by God.

In Psalm 42:1, the psalmist says, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God." And Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

So the way salvation works is that you see yourself as bankrupt spiritually, destitute and in need of a Savior, and then you begin to hunger for the righteousness that you don't have and that only God can give by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the story of the prodigal son, who was in the pigpen, he changed his mind about his situation and went back to his father. The Bible says, "He came to himself" when he began to be in want. As long as he had money, friends, a party, a good time, he was satisfied, but when he began to be in want, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants'" (Luke 15:17-19). That's what it means to "hunger and thirst for righteousness." That's what it means to see yourself bankrupt before God and then hunger for God.

The reason why the hungry are blessed, verse 21 of our text, is "For you shall be filled." And only God can fill your empty life.

I will never forget when I was a senior in high school, I was living far from God. One day my mom stuck her finger right in my face and said, "John, you'll never be happy until you give your heart to Jesus." She messed me up so bad, the blessed woman that she was! I couldn't have fun anymore! It just ate away at my soul. I couldn't be happy until I gave my heart to Jesus. Like a prodigal son, I had to find myself in the pigpen. And I heard her words again: "John, you'll never be happy until you give your heart to Jesus." The Hound of Heaven went after me. Then I finally came to faith in Jesus Christ, and He filled my empty heart.

So the second Beatitude, in verse 21, is, "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled." Now notice the contrasting woe to this Beatitude, in verse 25. He says, "Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger." What a contrast! Jesus said, "Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25).

I was trying to find life, but I was losing it. But when I gave up my life for Christ's sake, that's when I found life. So it's sad to see people constantly seeking after money, pleasure, power, popularity and their passions. Their lives are empty.

The third Beatitude is in verse 21. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh." Notice the word "now." There is a contrast between this world, "now," and the future kingdom of God, the world to come. We live in the kingdom of God now, where there is joy and peace in Christ, but there is also weeping. But the blessing is, "You shall laugh."

What kind of sorrow or weeping is Jesus promising will be blessed? This sorrow is not a sinful, self-centered sorrow like Ahab had when he mourned for Naboth's vineyard. It's not a weeping over some regret or failure like Judas Iscariot. It's a godly sorrow that brings repentance. It's like David after he was exposed in his sin with Bathsheba. In Psalm 51:1-2, 12, he cried out to God, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies. Blot out my transgressions....Restore to me the joy of Your salvation."

It's like Peter, when he denied the Lord three times. He went out and "wept bitterly" (Luke

22:62) in repentance. It's weeping over my sins. We should grieve over the things that grieve God and weep over what God weeps over. We shouldn't be rejoicing and laughing over our sins but weeping over them. So it's crying out to God over our sins and the sins of others.

Psalms 126:5 says, "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy." Matthew 5:4 says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." So if you are weeping now over your sin and seeing God forgive you, then you will be comforted by the Holy Spirit. There is nothing greater than the comfort and joy of sin that is forgiven. There is that desire that all I want is to be right with God.

The contrasting woe or paradoxical statement to this Beatitude is in verse 25. "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep." Turn the TV on and you'll see Hollywood laughing. Look at all the humor they have, which is not funny. They should be weeping and mourning over their sins. How sad. For the non-Christian, the world is as close to heaven they'll ever get; for the Christian, the world is as close to hell as they'll ever get. There is nothing to be laughing about when you're sinning.

Think how radical these Beatitudes are. "Blessed are the poor...you who hunger...you who weep" and now in the fourth Beatitude, it says "when men hate you."

The fourth Beatitude, in verses 22-23, is "Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake," which means "for following Jesus"—that's an important qualification. "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven..." not on earth "...for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets."

The corresponding Beatitude in Matthew 5:10 says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs..." which is emphatic, meaning "theirs only" "...is the kingdom of heaven." So it is the mark of a true believer. The Bible says, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

If you're not being persecuted, ostracized or put down for your faith in Christ, are you letting your light shine? Are you telling others the truth? Or are you compromising?

Notice the nature of our rejection, in verse 22. "Hate you...exclude you...revile you..." which means "insult you" "...cast out your name as evil."

It was just a couple of weeks ago that the Kansas City Chiefs' Harrison Butker gave a speech at a graduation. How fitting it was to see the hatred, the separation, the reproach, the rejection of someone who said something that was totally right-on. It's an indictment of where we are as a culture. It's horrifying to me! This guy was rejected and attacked simply because he talked about women having children and being mothers and taking care of their family. What an abomination for people to attack that!

So we live in a culture that is the opposite of God. What God says is on one side, and what the

world says is on the other side.

On what side do you want to live? In the world, where you will be liked and patted on the back, be accepted, be “politically correct,” go with the crowd, say what’s palatable, have everyone’s approval? Or stand with God?

I’d rather stand alone with God. Take the whole world, but give me Jesus. What an awesome thing that is! God’s ways are not our ways; they are past our finding out.

Now notice the reason for the rejection, verse 22: “For the Son of Man’s sake.” In Matthew 5:10, it says, “for righteousness’ sake.” In 1 Peter 2:19-20, Peter says that if you are persecuted or suffer, make sure it is for doing good and not for doing evil. If you do something stupid and get put down, don’t say, “Oh, I’m being persecuted ‘for righteousness’ sake!” No; you’re being persecuted for being a dodo bird. That’s not being blessed; you deserved it. But if you are doing what’s righteous and you suffer, then you are blessed.

How are we to respond to this kind of rejection and persecution? We are not to retaliate. It doesn’t say we are to punch them in the nose. It doesn’t say we are to beat them up in the name of Jesus. Some say, “Well, don’t we have the doctrine of ‘laying on of hands’?” Yes; but that’s not what it means. “These guys were laughing at me, so I beat them up!” It doesn’t work that way. Neither are we to sulk like a child or feel sorry for ourselves. And we’re not just to “grin and bear it” like a stoic.

Notice what Scripture says, in verse 23: “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.” The word “rejoice” is actually an imperative or a command, and it’s in the present tense.

When Paul and Silas were falsely accused, arrested, beaten and thrown into prison, the Bible says they “were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

So our response should be joy and rejoicing; that we are counted worthy to suffer for His name’s sake. But at my age, I don’t jump for joy; I just kind of bounce a little. But I rejoice in my persecution.

And why should we rejoice? Verse 23, “For indeed your reward is great in heaven.” This tells us that our citizenship is in heaven. That’s where our values should be: heaven. If my value is in my character, then my persecution shouldn’t upset me; it’ll make me rejoice. But if I value comfort over character, then the persecution will upset me, and I won’t rejoice. In Romans 8:18, it says, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

Secondly, we rejoice not only because we have a heavenly reward coming but verse 23 also says, “For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.” We are in holy company. The prophets of God were persecuted: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Daniel. All those great men of

God, those prophets, were persecuted, so I'm in good company.

Now notice the contrasting woe to this fourth Beatitude, in verse 26: "Woe to you when all men speak well of you." Isn't that interesting. When everybody's singing your praise, everybody's patting you on the back, everybody thinks you're so wonderful, "Woe to you...for so did their fathers to the false prophets."

So either you're speaking the truth and you're persecuted by the world, or you're a false prophet and you're applauded by the world. The Bible says that "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Teachers will come and "itch the ears" of the people and tell them what they want to hear rather than what they should hear: the truth of God's Word. These false teachers are famous, popular, they're liked and applauded by the non-Christian world. Then the faithful prophets of God, the faithful men of God, the faithful preachers of God's Word are persecuted and ostracized.

John Stott said, "Persecution is simply the clash between two irreconcilable value systems." And Jesus said, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you" (John 15:18). Jesus' feet, His hands, His side, His head were scarred. Amy Carmichael said, "Could he have followed far, who has no wound nor scar?" Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20). "Let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24).

One of the challenges of being a Christian in America is we have had it so good for so long. But the day is coming—and is here now—when just being a Christian speaking the truth of God's Word, you could be criminalized, marginalized and attacked.

So are you going to stand in God's kingdom, or in the kingdom of this world?

In Luke 16:19-31, there is a story that illustrates our entire text. It's a story Jesus gave about Lazarus and the rich man. I don't think it's a parable; I think it's an actual, true story. "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day." He had a beautiful house, lots of food and servants. It means he lived lavishly. But the poor man, Lazarus, lived outside the rich man's gate on the sidewalk, was full of sores and begged for "the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table."

If you stop right there in the story, which of the two men would you rather be? Obviously the rich man. Who wants to be full of sores, begging for crumbs out on the sidewalk?!

But then the story goes on. The rich man died. Your money can't keep you from death. It can't save your soul from the hand of the grave. "What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave?" (Psalm 89:48). Rich people die just like poor people. Death is the great equalizer. So the rich man died and went to hell. Then Lazarus died and he was "carried by angels..." his pallbearers "...to Abraham's bosom" or "Paradise," a place

of comfort.

There was a big gulf between Abraham's bosom and the place of torment, where the rich man was. He then lifted up his eyes and saw Lazarus in Abraham's bosom and said, "'Father Abraham...send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things...'" Abraham had been rich, full, he laughed, he had been applauded and popular. "'...and likewise Lazarus evil things.'" So now Lazarus is comforted and the rich man is tormented.

Now don't misunderstand the story; the rich man didn't go to hell because he was rich. People don't go to hell because they're rich. And poor people don't go to heaven because they're poor. The only way to get to heaven is through Jesus Christ by trusting Him. But if you reject Him, you will go to hell.

What happened here was a reversal of the roles; the rich man became the poor man, and the poor man became the rich man. The rich man became the beggar, and the beggar became the rich man.

Which are you?